

INDIGENOUS CULTURE IN THE INTEGRATION OF GUATEMALAN SOCIETY

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Introduction

This work summarizes some cultural characteristics of indigenous communities that influence the process of integration of Guatemalan society. It is an ethnographic survey through Guatemala's social landscape to determine certain aspects that stand out in the country's social structure. We thank the University of San Carlos of Guatemala for the opportunity it provides us to conduct this study at the Center for Folkloric Studies of the General Directorate of Research, within the Program of Culture and Thought of Guatemalan Society.

To address the topic, first we must acknowledge that in our country, ethnography shows us the existence of ethnic differences. We cannot speak of a real Guatemalan society because the integration of a social structure under a single cultural pattern has not been achieved. For this reason, the study of Guatemalan ethnography assumes great importance, as there are two major ethnic groups with different cultures: the indigenous culture and the ladino culture.

The culture of the indigenous people is native to these lands, complex, with a rich content of varied aspects that govern their ways and manner of living. It has its origins in the ancient Mayans, and we still observe traits that bring to light the behavior of groups that cultivated a great culture. They live in linguistic groups, maintaining their social organization and cultural integrity, within a set of traditions and customs passed down through generations.

Currently, more than half of the Guatemalan population is indigenous, and this observation speaks for itself in terms of several million inhabitants. The natural heritage of the indigenous people is the land, and their cultural heritage is corn (maize). The cultivation of this crop is widespread among all indigenous groups, and around it unfolds the rich cultural complex that distinguishes them.



SAN BARTOLOME, JOCOTENANGO, Quiché, on a holiday the marimba runs through the town.

The ladino culture holds social, cultural, and economic dominance throughout the country, and for this reason, they enjoy the greatest opportunities to live in better conditions. Additionally, they dominate the government and all national institutions. Their origin stems from prevailing hereditary tax systems due to conquest rights.

Both populations differ culturally and by their very nature are antagonistic. For over four hundred years, this situation has persisted, and a single society has yet to be formed, despite both populations inhabiting the same territory and being Guatemalan. When this situation is viewed from various angles such as society, culture, economy, politics, religion, and many others, a disheartening panorama is revealed. In all the clusters within the country, indigenous people live in difficult situations where conditions prevail that limit the development of human personality and family.

It's difficult to talk about social structure or societal integration without referencing the sociological issues of the country. Between both indigenous and ladino cultures, there exists a direct or indirect interrelation, which could precisely be a process of integrating indigenous society into Guatemalan society. However, social problems must be overcome, and to achieve this, all obstacles opposing integration must disappear. This survey necessarily must focus on where the problems lie, in order to come to understand indigenous society and culture, and to see what is happening internally to determine the process of changes required for that integration. This exposes a harsh reality filled with problems of all kinds, as indicated earlier and as further demonstrated, since the existence of these two cultural groups in Guatemala's social structure presents a significant and challenging problem complex, but not impossible to overcome in reaching the integration of a single society, as scientists studying societies say.

Understanding the contemporary state of Guatemalan sociology is a challenging problem to confront, especially when considering that one must first study the complex structural aspects of that society and the attitudes of the human entity that determine its norms of behavior. There are traditional norms that, turned into social pillars, have kept society divided into the two sectors indicated, of which one is dynamic and the other is in a difficult state of stagnation that has not allowed it to develop its human institutions. This situation also does not allow it to contribute its share to improving its ways of life and participating in the emergence of the country from the current state of affairs in which it finds itself.

All indigenous people experience similar circumstances in the face of the civilizing process of social integration. They have been born, organized, and developed their own culture in their own territory, thereby preserving well-engrained cultural values that do not easily allow them to transform their way of life into one that keeps them unable to improve, overcome, and achieve livelihoods on equal footing with the civilizing ladinos.

The study seeks to conduct an analysis of organizational characteristics from social, cultural, and economic viewpoints, to understand the customs, beliefs, and traditions that influence human behavior. This is aimed at understanding how indigenous

people navigate their normal lives and the factors that influence their behavior, in order to interpret their conduct, thoughts, and identity in the context of the national integration process.

It also aims to understand the influence that the environment exerts on the social, cultural, economic, religious, and other aspects of individuals, families, and indigenous society.

It is worth noting that the study aims to awaken interest in intensifying research on indigenous culture, to understand the historical and cultural traditionalism of our race, which preserves many situations without undergoing changes.

After reflecting briefly on the content of this brief analysis in our study, I consider it appropriate to now present the result obtained regarding the characteristics of indigenous culture in the integration of Guatemalan society.



JACALTENANGO, Huehuetenango. El Calvario on a Sunday.

Social Structure of Guatemala

The structure of Guatemalan society is heterogeneous, consisting of the two predominant ethnic groups, indigenous and ladinos, each with their own distinct characteristics and marked cultural differences stemming from their respective origins, maintained within the environment in which they live. The relationship between these groups is subject to essential aspects required for human survival. When we speak of ethnic groups, we are making a necessary and firm differentiation; it must be understood that these are distinct societies with different cultures that distinguish one from another.

Each group, within itself, has its own types of behavior, and their feelings, values, traditions, and beliefs differ markedly. For this reason, we believe that due to these particularities, our country as a whole exhibits a socio-cultural infrastructure characterized

by heterogeneity. These distinct characteristics of each group cannot and will not merge without the implementation of appropriate programs for understanding, comprehension, and social development. It could be that the next step would involve an interrelation of the cultural and social values of each group, allowing for the application of suitable techniques according to the environment, to avoid exerting pressures that could lead to social maladjustments.

We must remember that each of these groups holds different types of power within society. The non-indigenous or ladino group, with a Western culture, dominates politics and central power, and all national institutions fall under their jurisdiction. The predominance of the indigenous group, on the other hand, lies in its large population enjoying demographic unity and a unique culture based on traditions and customs preserved over many generations, keeping them living within an environment reminiscent of decades past. From this perspective, indigenous culture has not yet fully integrated into the structure of Guatemalan society.

The civilizing pressure may eventually absorb the indigenous population, although they peacefully resist. But how can this be achieved? Force is not advisable. I believe an effective measure would be the observation and study of the social structure of indigenous culture. This reflection could allow us to achieve orderly, methodical, and sustained development through planning and the use of technology, which, when applied with the necessary resources, could enable us to achieve national transformation.

The current **social structure** needs a transformation; an interrelation of all its integrating sectors and a general consensus of nationality among all its inhabitants, progressively setting goals for national development. Viewing the country as a whole, we are faced with the issue that it is an underdeveloped country, in which all sectors comprising it must undergo changes to overcome this state of affairs.



SAN JUAN SACATEPEQUEZ, Guatemala. Old building of the Township, destroyed by the 1976 earthquake.

The **traditional attitude** of all sectors must be replaced, conservatism and the paternalistic and indifferent stance of authorities and the non-indigenous dominant group should be eliminated. Rational norms of conduct should be achieved to provide the social

whole with a path towards development, so that all sectors work together towards a common goal: Guatemalan social integration.

It is undeniable that a country like Guatemala, due to its own history and the fact that one of the most highly esteemed pre-Hispanic cultures in the American continent emerged within its territory, now has to confront a series of socio-cultural problems, precisely originating from the Spanish conquest.

The colonial process led to many cultural and social divergences; the conquered group was pressured and discriminated against entirely, a situation quite difficult to eradicate unless we understand that all Guatemalans share the same racial, social, and cultural origin and belong to the same nationality.

So, to discuss **Guatemalan society**, we necessarily have to refer to a distinction (not discrimination) between two ethnic pressure groups, each with a large number of integrated individuals. We are referring to the indigenous group and the non-indigenous group. This distinction or classification is cultural in nature; if we were speaking in racial terms, we would mention classifications of white, mestizo, indigenous, black, and yellow populations, but there have been many degrees of mixture among these groups. For the purpose pursued by this work, we only discuss indigenous people and ladinos, or non-indigenous individuals, including among the latter all those who are not indigenous racially.



CUNEN, Quiché, Baile de los Gracejos celebration.

The significant human entity within the Guatemalan nationality is the indigenous population. The population it comprises is distributed throughout the national territory, concentrated primarily in rural areas. The acculturation of the Guatemalan people has not

been dynamic, leading us to believe that if the population increases, so too will the problems. Consequently, we estimate that the indigenous population still constitutes more than half of the national population, although this perception may change based on the results of the latest censuses.

The consequences are evident at first glance, and we observe that indigenous people are socially, culturally, economically, and politically marginalized (to a somewhat relative extent), which has limited their development to the point where they seem indifferent to the country's progress. It has always been said that culture is inherently dynamic, but indigenous culture has developed very little due to the oppression it faces from ladino culture, a logical consequence of the limitations imposed since colonial times. This oppression has been inherited by current generations, who see it as a serious problem that must be carefully addressed with clear objectives within a national development plan.

Indigenous society is characterized by its industriousness in group cooperation with its own group's elements, and its society comprises relationships that bind human beings, keeping them integrated into their own culture. This integration allows few opportunities for individuals, families, and society as a whole to carry out their own development, which is the collective that binds the entire group through its traditional normative character.

That indigenous society, divided into various groups classified geographically and linguistically, as observed in another section of this study, does not exhibit significant levels of independent development. If any are observed, they are few in relation to the nation, and it could be said that it lacks the ability to progress through its own means. It is entirely incapable of performing this function during this era, which is focused on technical development objectives towards general improvement goals.

Powerfully ingrained aspects of the traditionalist social system are still preserved, and some patterns are so strongly integrated that they may resist a development program or cultural changes.

Currently, traditional organizational systems are conservatively enforced. We can observe some of a social nature, others cultural, economic, and political, in addition to those imposed to a certain extent like religious ones. Regarding social aspects, we can say that ladino society imposes its criteria.



SAN JUAN SACATEPEQUEZ, Guatemala, Central Park and Old Church destroyed in the 1976 earthquake.

Among the cultural aspects, we find a series of factors such as lack of education. This attribute of culture is limited to what parents can teach their children within the home. There are few public schools in rural areas; many communities lack this cultural incentive to develop human personality and increase knowledge, and when education does exist, it is often deficient. According to all censuses conducted in Guatemala, the majority of the population is illiterate, predominantly among indigenous people. Acculturation programs have not reached all communities and have been limited in their impact in this regard.

Indigenous culture is highly absorptive, uniting individuals within its society in a traditionalist organizational system. Family integration remains patrilineal and patriarchal, with the man typically in charge and the woman moving to live in his home. Their individual life cycle unfolds with characteristics unique to their culture. They preserve a series of traditions and customs that impede personal progress for the individual as a member of the family, which is the primary unit of indigenous society.

Their kinship relationships, along with their consanguineous, marital, and ritual forms, are highly important for solving their personal, family, and collective problems.

Traditional family integration is affected when families seek better resources for survival and resort to temporary or permanent emigration. It is undeniable that the lack of resources tends to disintegrate the family.

The use of the indigenous language holds widespread power within indigenous culture. Even today, throughout the country, more than 22 indigenous languages are spoken, in addition to Spanish and the Caribbean Garifuna language of the Afro-descendant communities on the Atlantic coast and Belize. Many men speak some Spanish but do not fully master it, whereas women and children speak only their own language. Children, especially in areas with schools, learn some Spanish from teachers but continue to speak their mother tongue at home.

In their social interactions, indigenous individuals speak only their own language within their own society and are compelled to speak Spanish in their economic and commercial dealings. Both men and women speak only their indigenous language within the home.

The traditional attire is still preserved in many places, serving as the distinctive characteristic of indigenous groups. There are specific outfits for residents of one municipality and different ones for neighbors in another, even within the same departmental jurisdiction administratively and culturally, despite belonging to the same linguistic group. There are also ceremonial traditional outfits and everyday traditional outfits worn in daily life.



CHICHICASTENANGO, Quiché, ceremonial site of “Pascual Abaj”, where indigenous shamans or priests celebrate religious rites to the divinities of the supernatural world.

Religious organizations and **religious syncretism** are such powerful factors in indigenous society and culture that they dominate Guatemala's traditions. A large part of the indigenous population is organized into brotherhoods to venerate specific saintly images. They practice the Christian religion but have not forgotten their traditions, and strong traits of their inherited abstract culture are observed. Among indigenous peoples, abstract culture holds a predominant place in their minds. Any relationship, action, or activity undertaken—whether social, political, or economic—must have the support of the magical world. This aspect leads to religious heterogeneity that encompasses their own abstract world and the Christian religion, which has also deeply penetrated their conservative mindset.

The belief in the afterlife is manifested with admiration, respect, and fear, and has kept indigenous society engrossed in thought, serving the supernatural world through ceremonial rituals that are practiced with the utmost respect. This syncretism is such an important factor within the state of social affairs that it perpetuates the inhumane situation in which these people live, as they still carry in their minds the worship of their own religion. There are Christian religious organizations that continue to aim to convert

indigenous groups, but among them, the religion handed down by their ancestors still prevails.

Up to this point, we have referred to some of the traditional systems of indigenous society and culture; of course, there are many others still. However, it is necessary to consider other aspects to which special attention must be given.

Economic factors greatly influence the development of individuals, families, and communities, shaping their ways of life. Indigenous people form the basis of the national economy, with agriculture as their economic foundation. Among indigenous communities, traditionalist systems are observed, employing rudimentary methods and techniques. Their major problem is land fragmentation; the limited land ownership diminishes day by day, mainly due to the inheritance that must be passed on to children. The small indigenous plots are depleted by the continuous exploitation of monoculture (corn).

These economic practices yield very little to improve the quality of life for rural individuals. Indigenous people are predominantly farmers, focusing their agricultural work on cultivating corn and a few other products, primarily for family consumption. Occasionally, a small percentage of the production is sold to generate funds and acquire other household necessities. Their tools consist of machetes, axes, and hoes; few use plows. They are unfamiliar with irrigation systems, fertilization techniques, soil conservation, etc. They make minimal use of draft animals and own little to no livestock.

The indigenous individuals, who are available as laborers, specialize in providing services to third parties. They work as day laborers, particularly on large estates on the coast during certain times of the year for harvesting coffee and other export crops. They are the men available for agricultural work, and when they rent out their labor, they are subject to inhumane treatment.

In rural communities, job opportunities are also scarce. Many people turn to small-scale industries as a secondary source of income, which are economically poor and often involve active participation from women and children. Most of these industries are family or home-based, generating minimal income. Women produce traditional textiles for personal and family use, as well as some for sale. In all their economic activities, they use simple and even rudimentary technology.

The limited economic development of indigenous people has not necessarily depended on technological progress. This indicates that stable societies can exist with a certain spirit of commercialization and a monetary economy. Indigenous people earn low wages and have few opportunities to improve their current way of life; they live in rustic housing, have poor nutrition, no sanitation systems, and families face double the effort to balance the household budget. Certainly, they do not live in favorable conditions; they lead a peaceful life focused on work and subsistence, in a marginal situation with little involvement in national life.

The migratory system. The situation described above compels adult men to seek new sources of work outside their community, forcing them to migrate. Urban centers tend to absorb a large number of people from rural areas; the capital city of the republic attracts the highest number of these migrants, where a large portion of the population is concentrated, with the hope of improving their living conditions. However, it is impossible for these individuals to thrive or develop here because they are not provided with opportunities for advancement. Except for the city of Quetzaltenango, the capital does not have significant capacity to absorb people seeking employment, as most industries are concentrated here.

Those migrants have become disconnected from their cultural group and have entered a new culture where forces push them away because they are not prepared for constant adaptation. Their low cultural level keeps them marginalized from society; they encounter difficulties in finding jobs, and if they do, they earn low wages. They settle for living in poor housing with groups of misfits or maladjusted individuals who gravitate towards social ills that lead to criminality.

These consequences are constant and are often observed among people who did not achieve complete acculturation, remaining in a transitional phase between two cultures.

The other migratory trend leans towards the coastal estates, where they can find the work they seek in harvesting crops, but with low wages, poor nutrition, inadequate housing, no sanitation system, and added effort to earn more income, often involving women and children. This migratory movement occurs during certain times of the year when the agricultural calendar requires their services in areas of significant agricultural exploitation.

The indigenous person is not only a farmer but **also a trader**; they understand material values in terms of money, know the profit system, and are keenly secular. The indigenous tendency to seek sources of work that provide necessary income for subsistence also leads them to engage in commerce. Many individuals dedicate themselves to this economic activity. In certain communities, the majority of men specialize in this economic system; they can be seen traveling throughout the country seeking markets to sell products obtained through their own production or purchased from major commercial centers.



CHICHICASTENANGO, Quiché, Convite to the indigenous dance held in the public square, preceding the main festival on December 8th.

These merchants supply the capital and all urban centers with essential goods for family consumption, and this trade generally yields little economic income for them. Almost all women participate in the household economic activity and sell some of the products they cultivate.

Regional markets: In the country, there is a network of regional markets where approximately up to 10,000 merchants gather, including buyers and sellers. This gives an idea of how important these markets are.

The merchants who roam in the regional markets bring all necessary products, primarily food, to the ladino people, often right to their homes. In rural villages, indigenous individuals themselves supply people with all their needs in the sense we are discussing. You can see them traveling to all the markets in the country, even though there is no proper terrestrial communication system. They travel on foot and, if they have animals, they use them or rent them when necessary, carrying their products on their backs.

The transportation system also needs to be considered because it is deficient. Guatemala lacks a modern transportation system whose services are efficient in covering the entire population of the country. There are highways that lead from the capital to all four corners of the country, but few are in good condition as a direct means of terrestrial communication. As a result, many rural communities remain isolated. For example, in the departments of Huehuetenango and San Marcos, there are many communities where roads have not yet reached, and many people are still unaware of motor vehicles. Due to these conditions, communities do not often use buses, except when (in the case of men only) they need to seek necessary economic resources for their subsistence.

Those places have a large indigenous population living in subhuman conditions with little or no contact with modern civilization, and in many cases, due to their isolation, there is little desire for personal improvement. An extensive network of roads is needed to connect the entire country and pave the way for this aspect of development.



CHICHICASTENANGO, Quiché. Sale of firewood on market day in the churchyard of El Calvario.

Transportation in many places is still done by pack animals or even on the backs of peasants. Traveling on foot is common and takes several hours or even days to move from one place to another, resulting in little economic return from selling their products externally. Not all peasants own animals, and when they do, they are often insufficient for transportation. A person cannot carry more than a quintal (100 pounds) of agricultural products over long distances, and many times rural individuals have to do this out of necessity.

The absence of roads has hindered the development of rural communities because social or cultural progress does not always reach those areas. Hospitals are not available, and therefore, treatment of illnesses is still empirical, leading to deaths due to lack of medical attention. All these people are completely isolated from the modern culture of the country, which is where the problem of illiteracy is observed to a much greater or excessive degree compared to urban areas.

The aspects described as traditionalist systems result in indigenous people living in an excessively backward economic situation that does not allow for the development of their human institution, let alone their family. Their available resources lead them to rely on subsistence economy, which an author called "penny economy." The poor economy observed in relation to indigenous society leads rural people to live in conditions considered inappropriate for humans, resulting in noticeable deficiencies such as inadequate housing, lack of furniture, malnutrition, diseases (many originating from poor nutrition and lack of hygiene), inappropriate clothing, no use of footwear, and so on.

The **political system** of the indigenous community completes the picture we have described. The political institution takes on characteristics of seriousness and respectability among the elements that make up this society. All indigenous villages have their own local government, sometimes integrated into a single municipality and other times forming a separate municipality distinct from the ladino municipality, which is hierarchically more important. In any case, the indigenous municipality does not hold much importance in the decisions of the main municipality and is only considered in terms of collaboration for the provision of some essential services.



SAN JUAN SACATEPEQUEZ, Guatemala, a Street in the town, the municipal cemetery in the background.

This indigenous organization is representative in nature, and all its members are elected either through popular vote within the local community or chosen by the "principals" of the religious organizations that form this municipal structure. The "principals" are individuals who have attained the highest rank in the local society.

Indigenous people are very united among themselves, and their society is highly cohesive, with cultural patterns and contacts being widespread throughout the group; precisely because of this, they are easily used as instruments in partisan political games. They have consciously had little or no participation in the development of national life (using the word "development" strictly in the sense of change towards progress).

Indigenous people operate freely within their society because their traditional organizations allow for it. Their desire to participate in the broader society of the country is evident, and they should be given the opportunities they expect through suitable integration and development programs that lead all citizens to enjoy an improvement in their current way of life.



Village, SAN JOSE NACAHUIL, Township of San Pedro Ayampuc, department of Guatemala. A holiday in the community center.

Conclusions

1. The ladino, mixed-race, or non-indigenous group has been increasing considerably because they hold the social, cultural, and economic heritage of the country.
2. The indigenous group has been decreasing; however, it still constitutes more than half of the national population. Despite having embraced the new culture, they have always been marginalized, thus avoiding their free participation in the modern socio-cultural arena to improve their living conditions.
3. The ladino group has not allowed the indigenous group to demonstrate the level of development they have achieved to date, or whether they have diminished their own cultural value. They have been relegated to a negative form of participation in national life. This has compounded national problems, as indigenous people have not been able to achieve economic and cultural liberation to meet their needs more broadly.
4. The indigenous group operates freely within its society because their traditional organizations allow for it. Their desire for participation in the broader society of the country is evident, which has been denied to them as a result of the marginalization they have faced from the mestizo population.
5. The mestizo does not accept that the native excel in any cultural activities, as inherited from the conquerors, which are the flaws that must be eradicated to achieve the

integration of Guatemalan society, leading to an improvement in the current way of life for all citizens.

6. There is a movement to integrate all national sectors into forming a single Guatemalan society, and among them, the indigenous population has the willingness to integrate, but they are not allowed to do so. They are marginalized in all aspects of life, not given opportunities for social and cultural interaction, and even less so for free participation in economic life.
7. It is necessary to promote research and study of all the causes that motivate the problems encountered on the path to achieving integration of Guatemalan society. By identifying these causes, plans of action for social, cultural, and economic development can be formulated. With the consensus and participation of all national sectors, changes should be promoted that bring about improvements and satisfaction for all groups that have been marginalized up to this date.